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Physical Activity and Motivation

I recently received a copy of Canada's Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth 2008 (Go to <http://www.activehealthykids.ca> to see the report card). I knew that youth were inactive, but I did not realize how bad it was until I read the report. We have received a "D" the last two years. According to the report card this means there have been;

Insufficient appropriate physical activity opportunities and programs are unavailable to the majority of Canadian children and youth.

Is organized youth sport the solution to this problem? At first glance one may say yes, but upon looking at the facts I am afraid we are being misled if we think that by enrolling a child in a youth sport program you naturally promote activity.

In the book **Revolution in the Bleachers** by Regan McMahon, the author makes the claim that there has never been a time in North American society that more children have been participating in youth sport; yet we have never had more problems with youth obesity. She claims that youth sport, in its current state, is often the cause of youth obesity not the cure. To solve the obesity problem it is not about playing on a team, it is about developing a healthy attitude towards being physically active.

Playing on a youth sports team by itself does not promote being active:

- If the only activity is playing on a youth sport team one day a week;
- If playing on the team means only 12 minutes of actual playing time in the hour;
- If in the practice the majority of time is spent standing working on plays;
- If driving for over an hour to another community to play a game.

I know it looks cute to see little children in team uniforms. The whole family gets to travel to the tournament in another community. People get to cheer and dream of future greatness. I have seen too many children growing up sitting in bleachers on weekends. How is this impacting the family? How does this impact the nutrition of the children? How often does the family get to sit down and enjoy a meal together? How much activity are the children really getting?

The argument I often hear is that the children enjoy being on teams. Children like to eat things with lots of sugar also, but we as adults know that this is not right. As parents and guardians we are tasked to do what is best for children until they are able to lead themselves.

I also question the motivation for why children want to play on a team. Motivation is key to learning. In order to get the number of repetitions necessary to build the positive muscle memory you need to be successful at a sport, you need to be motivated. Motivation can be extrinsic or intrinsic. In the book **Disrupting Class** by Michael B. Horn and Curtis W. Johnson, the author defines extrinsic motivation as that which occurs outside of class. The person does something not because he/she found the task

interesting, but because it leads to something else. We often extrinsically motivate youth in sport with a jersey, sweat suits, medals and trips. So often coaches use bribes of trips and gear as the reason for why a player should join a certain team over another. The further the trip is from one's home or the more 'stuff' you receive the better the team must be.

Intrinsic motivation is when the task itself is stimulating and compels the individual to stay with the task. The child who is intrinsically motivated to play basketball has developed the passion and love for the game. This child is very likely to play some sort of basketball activity each and everyday. Activities can be as simple as dribble in the basement, practicing shot form while lying in bed or shooting hoops in the backyard or playground. The reason they do it is because they want too! This corresponds to the other shocking stat from the report card. Participation in youth sports among 15 -18 year olds declined from 77% to 58% between 1992 and 2005. Another way of looking at this is that if we had ten kids in 1992 eight of them were involved. In 2005 only six are involved in sport. I will contend that one of the reasons for this sudden drop is that:

We start children too young in organized sports and we have motivated them using extrinsic rewards.

When I was growing up we played a variety of sports depending on the season of the year. There were very few organized games by adults. In little league baseball we only played a maximum of 5-10 games and we never travelled outside our own little community. All of the games were played on the same diamond. The major difference between now and then was that we played some sort of baseball activity everyday. I cannot begin to count the number of balls I threw onto the roof to catch it when it rolled off or how many rocks I batted from a gravel pile my father got for the driveway. Once hockey season arrived we did the same thing, playing road hockey each and everyday. We developed a passion for the sport and more importantly were physically active each and everyday. We also knew as we grew older there was something to look forward to. We were taught the valuable lesson of delayed gratification. I am not naive enough to think we will return to the "good old days." There were many things that were not so good. I seem to remember that females were not included.

I do think we need to look at how we deliver youth sport and make sure that it does promote children being physically active. Here are some suggestions:

- Encourage children to be active between practice and games. At the ends of the session give them a challenge to be active before the next session. Please do not reward them with a prize. This promotes extrinsic motivation. We want them to develop a love for the game.
- Asking the children what they did to be active is a good way to start the next session. Get excited about the activities the children talk about.
- Encourage the children to get their brothers/sisters/friends and parents involved.
- Allow a time for free play. It always amazes me to watch children at the start of practice. So often they are very engaged and then we as coaches spoil it by stopping them and running what we want to do. Free play develops intrinsic motivation.

- Allow the children input into what they do.
- Explain, the how and the why, don't just tell players what to do. If you find yourself saying; "Because I told you so!" you are probably not developing an intrinsically motivated athlete.
- Set challenging expectations that match each child's personality and ability. Simple phrases like; "I think you could accomplish this if you worked on it at home." This is a great way to encourage being active.
- Get to know the children as individuals. What else goes on in their lives? Is this the only activity they have?
- Truly care about each child as an individual person.
- Adapt your instruction and support to individual differences. Not every child is an auditory learner. Equal is not fair.
- Make it fun.